

Annual vaccination against Covid-19 a possibility as coronavirus mutates: Lawrence Wong

TODAY, 25 January 2021

Education Minister Lawrence Wong said the pandemic could last four to five years. Despite a recent resurgence of cases, he stressed that Singapore is “far better” prepared to curb its spread.

Singaporeans’ resilience in the past year has given him confidence that the country will emerge stronger, he added.

Singaporeans may have to be vaccinated against Covid-19 yearly, just like how it is for influenza, Education Minister Lawrence Wong said. This is because new vaccines may need to be developed to combat more virulent strains of the coronavirus, given the uncertainties surrounding how the virus could mutate.

In the worst-case scenario, the world could find itself one step behind viral transmissions once again, he said on Monday (Jan 25) during a dialogue hosted by the Institute of Policy Studies.

The dialogue was the final event at the think tank’s four-day-long Singapore Perspectives conference titled Reset, which centred around a post-pandemic Singapore.

Early studies suggest that the South African variant of the Sars-CoV-2 coronavirus can evade the defences that vaccines build in our bodies, Mr Wong said.

The co-chair of the Government’s Covid-19 task force added: “The bottom line is that we live in a shared world and no one is safe until everyone is safe. It could take four to five years before we finally see the end of the pandemic and the start of a post-pandemic normal.”

RECENT RESURGENCE OF CASES

Mr Wong cautioned that despite Singapore securing enough vaccines for the population, any unexpected supply chain disruptions could throw a spanner in the works.

The Ministry of Health said last Friday that it is expecting delays of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine — the only one approved here so far — due to upgrading works at Pfizer’s manufacturing plant in Belgium.

Mr Wong stressed, though, that Singapore is in a “far better” position to deal with the virus than a year ago, with more robust contact-tracing and testing systems.

The recent stricter controls for the Chinese New Year period do not signal a “reset” to the restrictions imposed last year to curb the spread of the disease.

“When you see the community cases creeping up these few days, your mind goes back to the situation we were in at this time last year,” he said. “But there are important differences, and we should recognise the differences. We are in a far better and stronger position today.”

He was responding to a question from the moderator, Mr Warren Fernandez, editor-in-chief of daily broadsheet The Straits Times, on whether Singapore expects a return to those restrictions with the recent resurgence of cases.

Nearly a month since Singapore moved to Phase Three of its gradual reopening of the economy, the number of community cases has shot up over the past week, some of which have no links to confirmed cases and have contributed to the formation of clusters.

Some protective measures were tightened ahead of the Chinese New Year festivities, such as having a daily cap of eight visitors for each household that will be imposed from Tuesday.

WHAT HE SAW FROM 'FRONT-ROW SEAT'

In his one year as co-chair of the taskforce, Mr Wong said that he has seen the best of Singapore and the resilience Singaporeans have shown throughout the crisis.

"I am confident that we will prevail and emerge stronger from this crucible, and I do not say this lightly," he said.

Asked by Mr Fernandez what made him so sure, Mr Wong said that he has had a "front-row seat" witnessing the spirit of Singaporeans rallying together to respond to the pandemic.

Calling the explosion of cases in the migrant worker dormitories Singapore's "darkest hour" last year, when cases exceeded 1,000 daily, he said that the hospitals could easily have been overwhelmed.

But within a short period of time, the public and private sectors came together to set up community care facilities for the tens of thousands of migrant workers.

"We said it would be impossible but they made the impossible possible... Sometimes it's just a few people that change the course of history and change the trajectory in a crisis."

Mr Wong also said that the Government will build many more dormitories for migrant workers and urged Singaporeans to embrace rather than oppose the plans to build these facilities near their homes.

"The pandemic has shown that all of us can do more to respect the dignity of our migrant workers, appreciate and value them for the many, many contributions that they give to our society."

He hopes that people can recognise the efforts of the essential workers who have been in the vanguard of the fight against Covid-19 in Singapore.

Asked by an audience member how Singapore can raise the salaries of traditionally low-paying and low-status jobs that essential workers such as cleaners take on, he said that part of it can be done through government policy, and that is why there is the Progressive Wage Model.

The Progressive Wage Model is a framework where wages are pegged to skills, productivity and career development. It covers workers in the cleaning, security and landscaping sectors.

“But part of it is by the employers themselves redesigning jobs, enabling each worker to be more productive,” he said.

Workers, for instance, will also have to attend skills training courses so that employers can justify their higher pay.

OPPORTUNITIES FROM THE PANDEMIC

Referencing the title of the conference, Mr Wong highlighted three areas of policy thinking and habits that must be “reset”.

First, Singapore’s social compact must be to achieve a fairer and more equal society, as the pandemic has disproportionately impacted the poor.

To ensure that the playing field is level, Mr Wong said that his priority as education minister will be to invest in preschools so that parents will not see the need to get their children to attend expensive private enrichment classes.

Second, the slowdown in human activity during the pandemic has shown that it is possible to create a greener Singapore.

He said that Singapore has the potential to be a carbon trading and services hub in Asia focusing on sustainability.

Third, the country must forge a stronger sense of solidarity and cohesion when emerging from this crisis, rather than succumb to increased division as in other countries — where scientific fact and advice gets polarised through social and political lenses.

Asked by Mr Fernandez whether he had a slogan like past education ministers had, Mr Wong recalled how his mother, a former teacher, used to lament how new ministers would execute new programmes upon their appointment.

“And I can understand (her view). Things keep changing, and they don't feel like they are part of the solution, but it's something foisted on them,” he said.

“I think it should be what educators want. And all educators want to uplift every child and ensure that they are able to achieve their full potential. And that's what we will want to do, too, together with our educators in every school.”